

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



George F. Barber
1854-1915

George F. Barber & Company of Knoxville, Tennessee, was one of the most successful architectural mail order businesses in the country. During the 1890s and early 1900s, Queen Anne, Romanesque, Colonial Revival, Tudor and Bungalow style plans were provided by mail to builders throughout the United States. Barber's distinctively extravagant interpretations of popular architectural fashions make the designs sold by his company among the most unusual in Maine.¹

Established in Knoxville in 1888, George F. Barber & Company produced nine catalogues

and a monthly journal, *American Homes*, over the next fifteen years.² In Barber's advertising, home builders were invited to purchase a complete set of plans, elevations and full size details out of inexpensive catalogues (Figure 1).³ The most costly set of plans in *A Cottage Souvenir* No. 2, for example, were available for \$60.00.⁴ Major design changes, or whole new plans, could be requested for an additional fee.⁵ A form was provided asking specific questions ranging from what kind of interior finish was desired in each room to, "Do you prefer a Plain or rather Ornamental House?"⁶

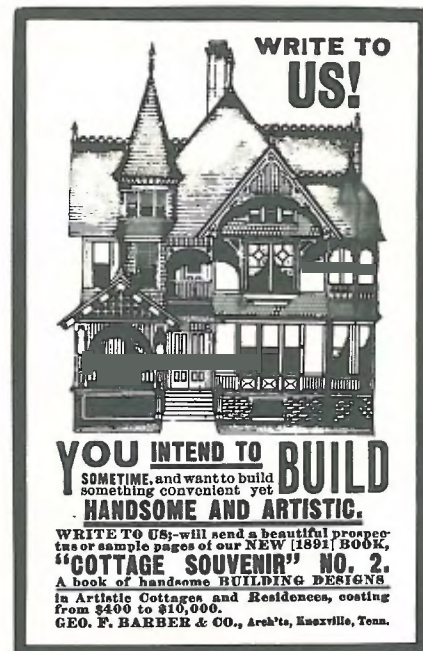


Figure 1. A George F. Barber & Co. Advertisement (Courtesy Michael A. Tomlan).



Figure 2. Edward Hanson House, Circa 1900 View
(Courtesy Michael John Hanson).

Probably Maine's largest Barber design was made in 1892 for Edward H. Hanson's house in Belfast (Figure 2). This residence was one of the most ostentatious examples of the Queen Anne style in the state. Hanson, the local manager of the Dana Sarsparilla Company of Boston, was an aggressive promoter of both his company and of the City of Belfast, where he served as mayor for ten consecutive terms.⁷ It is not surprising, therefore, that he would choose a design that served as a form of self-promotion.

This remarkable house had no less than six porches, two towers and a solarium, all elaborately embellished with decorative woodwork. In the traditional New England manner, the carriage barn was attached to the house. This one regional characteristic is not typical of Barber's work, and the transition between the two sections is somewhat awkward (Figure 3).

Significantly, all of the known Barber houses were constructed in towns where there were local contractors but no architects. Rockland, which



Figure 3. Hanson House, Circa 1900 View
(Courtesy Michael John Hanson).

was undergoing a building boom in the 1890s, has at least three residences derived from the Knoxville company. The Francis C. Norton House, for example, was built about 1897 and has survived unaltered except for the loss of roof cresting and the application of aluminum siding (Figure 4). This house is characteristic of Barber in the boldly articulated elements which include a broadly sweeping roof and an octagonal tower. A strong contrast with traditional houses of the same period is evident by comparing the Norton House with its neighbor on the west, visible in Figure 4.



Figure 4. Francis Norton House (Author).

Smaller homes were equally distinctive in the use of exterior ornamentation. Drawings for the house of Albert Holmes, a bookkeeper in Livermore Falls (c. 1900), could be obtained for \$14.00. Although conventional in plan, the exterior is ornamented with novelty siding and rather strikingly designed vergeboards (Figure 5). Examples such as this are important, for they illustrate how people of moderate means in rural areas of the state could afford an architect-designed residence that stood out in its neighborhood.

In Caribou is another example which, like the Holmes Residence, is located in a sparsely settled area of the state. The Simeon L. White House, built about 1895, features a common Barber plan first published by the architect in 1888 (Figure 6).⁸ This scheme was frequently reused by changing the design of the exterior ornamentation and, in the case of the White House, adding a corner tower in place of a second story porch. In 1906 the rear ell was extended to include another tower and a carriage barn.

While other Barber designs will no doubt be discovered, the relatively small number of



Figure 5. Design Used for Albert Holmes House Taken From *Cottage Souvenir* No. 2.

known examples probably gives an accurate representation of the firm's influence in Maine.⁹ These scattered survivors, however, are significant in contributing to a fuller understanding of the state's turn-of-the-century architecture.

Roger G. Reed
June, 1984



Figure 6. Simeon White House, Side Elevation, 1906 View
(Courtesy Mrs. Clara Piper).

Notes:

- ¹ Background information for this study is based on the work of Michael A. Tomlan, a leading authority on mail order architecture in general and Barber in particular. See Tomlan's new introduction, "Toward the Growth of an Artistic Taste" in *The Cottage Souvenir No. 2*, American Life Foundation, Watkins Glen, New York, 1982. See also by the same author, "Popular and Professional Journalism in the Nineteenth Century", a doctoral dissertation for Cornell University, 1983.
- ² George F. Barber was born in Dekalb, Illinois, and began his career as an architect there before moving to Tennessee for health reasons. The firm was dissolved in 1908.
- ³ Tomlan, "Toward the Growth of an Artistic Taste", op. cit., p. 8.
- ⁴ "Cottage Souvenir No. 2", Knoxville, 1891, p. 168.
- ⁵ The company suggested that minor changes would best be handled by local builders, *ibid.*, p. 10.
- ⁶ Tomlan, op. cit., p. 10.
- ⁷ *Republican Journal* (Belfast), March 3, 1893. It is clear that Hanson ordered the design for the house in correspondence with the Barber Company, *Republican Journal*, May 5, 1892.
- ⁸ *Carpentry and Building*, Vol. X, No. 3, March 1888, pp. 50-54. This design was republished in *Cottage Souvenir No. 2* as Design 41.
- ⁹ The citations for both the Hanson and White houses were obtained from Michael Tomlan.

List of Known Barber Designs in Maine

- Edward F. Hanson House and Gazebo, Northport Avenue, Belfast, 1892-93, Fred V. Cottrell, Builder, Destroyed. Cited on p. 55, *Artistic Homes* (1893).
- Amos S. Williams House, 55 Summer Street, Rockland, c. 1893, Altered. Design 54, *Cottage Souvenir No. 2* (1891).
- Simeon L. White House, 571 Main Street, Caribou, c. 1895, Altered. Cited in *Some of Our Clients and Their Homes*, c. 1895, p. 10.
- Wellington G. Singhi House, 172 Broadway, Rockland, c. 1896, Extant. Design 17, *Cottage Souvenir No. 2* (1891).
- Francis C. Norton House, 19 Beech Street, Rockland, c. 1897, Extant. Design 134, *Artistic Homes* (1893).
- Albert B. Holmes House, 7 High Street, Livermore Falls, c. 1900, Altered. Design 14, Plan 1, *Cottage Souvenir No. 2* (1891).
- Will Garvin House, 193 Main Street, Sanford, c. 1900, Extant. Attribution based on Ziegler and Craig houses cited in Michael Tomlan's 1981 Introduction to *Cottage Souvenir No. 2* (1891).

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